

## **Connecting Rural Americans to Care Act of 2016**

### **Senator Al Franken**

This legislation improve access to high-quality health care services in rural America by addressing two central challenges: the lack of transportation options and the need for more health information technology infrastructure.

**Background.** Patients and providers in rural communities face many demographic, financial, and geographic obstacles that limit their ability to access vital care and services. These obstacles include inadequate transportation options and nonexistent or insufficient broadband and related health information technologies. Without these services, people not only miss necessary appointments, they also miss out on transformative care innovations. This bill addresses these two issues by providing additional funding for medical transportation services and by increasing coordination and programming for health information technologies in rural areas.

**Improves Transportation Options in Rural Areas.** *This bill provides increased funding for transportation programs that serve patients living in rural areas.*

- Allows states to reimburse volunteer drivers who transport Medicaid patients for non-emergency medical appointments for no-load miles. This means that volunteers who provide low-income seniors with rides to medical visits may be reimbursed for their entire trip, whereas current Medicaid rules only allow states to reimburse volunteer drivers for the portion of their trip when the patient is in their vehicle.
- Doubles the funding for the Innovative Coordinate Access and Mobility pilot program, otherwise known as the Rides to Wellness Initiative, to more \$26 million. The Rides to Wellness Initiative seeks to increase partnerships between health and transportation providers to ensure that patients are able to make their medical appointments and take advantage of other services such as screenings. The initiative funds innovative projects tailored to specific needs of each community.
- Directs the Secretary of Transportation to prioritize and carry out national projects within the Rural Transportation Assistance Program to increase access to health care services in rural areas.

**Strengthens Rural Health Information Technology Infrastructure.** *This legislation increases coordination across federal agencies and helps to prioritize funding projects in rural areas for the purposes of improving the delivery of health care services.*

- Establishes Interagency Task Force on Rural Health Information Technology to coordinate delivery of financial and technical assistance to rural providers and provide leadership and recommendations on best practices to increase internet access in rural areas.
- Requires Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to simplify and strengthen its Healthcare Connect Fund, which expands access to broadband services for health care providers in rural areas. This legislation increases the discount the program provides on broadband services, equipment, and connections from 65% to 85%; local health care providers will now only be required to pay up to 15% of these expenses. The legislation also calls on the FCC to streamline the application process, and permits the FCC to further reduce cost sharing for health care providers in tribal areas.